

A REPORTER AT LARGE

# THE SHODDY CONCLUSIONS OF THE MAN SHAPING THE GUN-RIGHTS DEBATE

*John Lott is the most influential pro-gun researcher in the country. But his methods and findings have been repeatedly debunked.*

**By Mike Spies**

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Illustration by Lia Liao

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In 1957, the small-arms manufacturer Armalite created the AR-15—short for Armalite Rifle—at the invitation of the U.S. Army, which was seeking an effective lightweight combat weapon. When the Department of Defense reviewed a version of the rifle in 1962, during the early stages of the Vietnam War, its report stated that the gun’s “lethality” and “reliability” were “particularly impressive.” From forty-nine feet away, it noted, an Army Ranger fired a round into a Vietcong soldier’s head and “took it completely off.”

In recent years, gun companies have aggressively marketed semi-automatic AR-style rifles to civilians. Manufacturers now produce as many as two and a half million such firearms per year, and they routinely show up in the country’s deadliest and most horrifying acts of mass violence, such as the rampages that occurred, less than two weeks apart, in Buffalo, New York, and Uvalde, Texas, in May.

Last year, a federal court addressed the question of whether California could ban such guns. The state was one of eight, along with the District of Columbia, that had a prohibition in place. Multiple plaintiffs, including a handful of gun-rights groups, argued that the California statute was useless, relying on the statistical expertise of an economist named John R. Lott, Jr. Lott, who is sixty-four, with wispy gray hair, authoritatively delivers blizzards of empirical conclusions in an unthreatening Midwestern monotone. In a sworn statement to the court, Lott summarized his research on assault-weapon bans, writing that there is “no credible evidence” that such laws “have any meaningful effect of reducing gun homicides and no discernable crime-reduction impact.”

After a brief bench trial, the judge reached his decision in June, 2021. He overturned California's ban, and quoted Lott's assessment verbatim. Afterward, Lott published an op-ed in *The Hill*. The ruling "primarily concentrated on public safety," he wrote, and "the judge relied on my research."

For almost thirty years, Lott, who has a doctorate in economics from U.C.L.A., has provided the empirical backbone for the gun-rights movement. Virtually every statistical argument against regulation—made by lobbyists, Republican lawmakers, and National Rifle Association members alike—is based on his research, which reaches two conclusions: guns make Americans safer, and gun restrictions place them in danger. He stands against droves of distinguished academics who have determined that the opposite is true. But, in the scientific debate over firearms, no one has had greater influence.

Lott's first and most famous book, "More Guns, Less Crime," was published in 1998 by the University of Chicago Press, one of the country's most prestigious academic publishers. The book has been republished multiple times, and offers one seemingly irrefutable statistic after another. It specifies that when states relaxed laws restricting the concealed carrying of handguns, counties saw a roughly eight-per-cent drop in murders, a five-per-cent reduction in rapes, and a seven-per-cent decrease in aggravated assaults. The text is the basis for arguments blaming "gun-free zones" for mass shootings, and the notion, popularized by the N.R.A., that only a good guy with a gun can stop a bad guy with a gun. "Overall," Lott writes, "my conclusion is that criminals as a group tend to behave rationally—when crime becomes more difficult, less crime is committed."

Eight books have followed "More Guns, Less Crime," including "The War on Guns: Arming Yourself Against Gun Control Lies," and "Gun Control Myths: How Politicians, the Media, and Botched 'Studies' Have Twisted the Facts on Gun Control." Lott has also produced a steady stream of scholarly articles published in academic periodicals, along with op-eds that appear in regional newspapers and the *Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. He has had appointments

at Ivy League schools, and his work is touted by leading Republican politicians, including Donald Trump and Senator Ted Cruz, of Texas. “What makes him so invaluable,” Cruz has written of Lott, “is his ability to go beyond philosophical arguments and to engage opponents of gun ownership on the facts.”

Lott’s findings and methods have generated scathing criticism from prominent academics, who have questioned his veracity and exposed flaws in his work. But the critiques have not diminished his stature. Instead, they have fed the conspiracy-oriented mentality of the gun-rights movement. In the eyes of its adherents, and in the messaging of the gun lobby and trade groups, attempts to discredit Lott are really attempts to suppress the truth.

In 2013, Lott founded the Crime Prevention Research Center, a nonprofit to support his research. He takes pains to stress his and the organization’s independence. In his statement in the California case, Lott wrote that the C.P.R.C. “does not accept donations from gun ammunition makers or organizations such as the National Rifle Association (NRA) or any other organizations involved in the gun control debate on either side of the issue.” The same language also appears in his books, on his Web site, and in other legal filings.

Yet Lott is a mainstay at the N.R.A.’s annual meeting, where he typically conducts multiple seminars on his research and hosts a table on the tradeshow floor. In 2015, during the group’s convention in Nashville, Tennessee, he held one of the C.P.R.C.’s first fund-raisers at a hotel around the corner. One of the speakers, a conservative celebrity author and radio host named Dana Loesch, would soon be a face of the N.R.A., alongside its leader, Wayne LaPierre. At the C.P.R.C. fund-raiser, she said, of Lott, “We don’t have anybody else on our side that does what he does.”

**L**ott did not grow up in a family with a fondness for guns. “I know my grandparents and stuff would be shocked to see how my research has

changed my views over time,” he said in a deposition taken during the California case. Lott was born in Detroit, and his family later moved to Florida, where he attended a Catholic high school. His mother and father were churchgoers, and he was close to his maternal grandparents, who were Democrats. Lott now owns two shotguns, a semi-automatic rifle, and two semi-automatic handguns—a Smith & Wesson M&P .40-calibre, and a Ruger 9-millimetre. He has a concealed-handgun permit because, he has said, “I didn’t think that it was proper for me to go and be telling people about these benefits if I didn’t actually kind of walk the walk myself on it.”

Lott received his bachelor’s degree in economics from U.C.L.A. in 1980, and then spent another four years at the school earning his master’s and Ph.D. in the same subject. According to a former classmate, Jon Karpoff, Lott did not stand out in “unusual or unique ways” at U.C.L.A.

Starting in 1988, Lott served for eighteen months as the chief economist on the U.S. Sentencing Commission, which helped inform his views on firearms restrictions. During his deposition, he claimed that the “very people that supply illegal drugs are the same ones that sell illegal guns,” and if the U.S. can’t stop the flow of drugs, then prohibiting firearms would be useless, too. When asked if he had an empirical basis for his assessment, he said that, at the commission, he read through “hundreds of cases,” and was “convinced” that “these guys not only have weapons but they’re entrepreneurs.”

“Would you present yourself as an expert in criminology?” Lott was asked at one point.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

Lott—who has never been granted tenure at a university—returned to U.C.L.A. for another temporary teaching appointment before being hired, in 1991, at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton business school. He kept in touch with

Karpoff, who was at the University of Washington, and in 1993 the two co-authored a paper on corporate fraud. “He really was one of the best economists that I knew,” Karpoff said. “He was very thorough, creative in how to test—genuinely test—rather than just seek to confirm ideas.”

Lott says that he was teaching a class on white-collar crime at Wharton when his students asked him if he might turn his attention to gun policy. He agreed, and began to “read through a number of papers,” Lott said in his deposition. “And I would have to say I was pretty shocked how poorly done the existing research was.”

In 1994, Lott arrived at the University of Chicago, where he eventually became a fellow at the law school. The country was in the early stages of a significant shift. Historically, local and state authorities decided whether to issue permits to people who wanted to carry concealed handguns. But between 1987 and 1991, eight states had enacted “shall-issue” laws that allowed applicants who could legally purchase a firearm to automatically receive a concealed-carry license, as long as they paid a fee and completed a rudimentary training course. Lott and a doctoral student named David Mustard, who is now an economics professor at the University of Georgia, collected and analyzed fifteen years of data from some three thousand counties. In January, 1997, they published their findings in the *Journal of Legal Studies*, concluding that the new laws had caused violent crime to drop precipitously in the states that adopted them. The study provided the empirical support for the “shall-issue” statute—and justified its continued expansion to other states.

The study was extensively covered in the media, and featured in a congressional hearing on guns. Within a year, multiple statehouses held debates on concealed-carry permits, with Lott serving as the lead witness in four of them. But scientists soon challenged his conclusions. One paper, published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, warned that “the flaws” in Lott’s article were “so substantial, and the findings so at odds with criminological theory and research, that any conclusions

about the effects of “shall-issue” laws based on this study are dubious at best.”

David Hemenway, an economist and a professor of health policy at Harvard University, said that Lott’s paper “created a cottage industry of scholars analyzing the same data sources and largely refuting” its results.

The next year, Lott published “More Guns, Less Crime.” The *Wall Street Journal* called the book “compelling,” and said it was filled “with enough hard evidence that even politicians may have to stop and pay attention.”

In the beginning of 1999, Otis Dudley Duncan, who is regarded as one of history’s most important quantitative sociologists, wrote the first of a number of letters to Lott. He was especially skeptical of a sentence in Lott’s book that stated, “If national surveys are correct, 98 percent of the time that people use guns defensively, they merely have to brandish a weapon to break off an attack.” Lott had not specified which surveys, but, in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed published around the time of the book, he attributed the figure to polls by the *Los Angeles Times*, Gallup, and Peter Hart Research Associates. The number, he wrote, was a percentage of the “at least 760,000, and possibly as many as 3.6 million, defensive uses of guns per year.”

Duncan determined that Lott’s assertion was simply wrong. In May, Duncan informed Lott he was writing an article about what he would call the “rogue number,” and later that month sent him a draft. One sentence summarized his assessment: “The ‘98 percent’ is either a figment of Lott’s imagination or an artifact of careless computation or proofreading.”

Tallies of defensive gun use are inherently problematic. They depend on surveys that rely on a respondent’s memory and perception of threat, as well as one’s willingness to tell the truth, all of which can be influenced by politics, world view, and other biases. The Department of Justice attempts to track defensive gun uses through a twice-yearly survey that tries to mitigate some of the issues. For instance, participants only answer questions about self-defense if they first state

that they were a victim of a certain crime, such as burglary or larceny. As a result, the government finds that there are around seventy thousand defensive gun uses per year, making them much rarer events.

The government's figures seemed to undermine Lott's argument. If Americans were rarely using a firearm to protect themselves from criminal acts, how could more guns equal less crime? And if Lott's surveys really did present a more accurate picture, why were such incidents so seldom documented? Lott said that "brandishing" addressed both questions. "The media understandably play up graphic gun attacks by outlaws," he explained in *The American Enterprise*. "They can't easily show us the vastly more common cases—numbering in the hundreds of thousands to millions each year—where law-abiding citizens brandish a gun and cause criminals to flee."

After Lott received a draft of Duncan's article, he sent him a letter. He now said that the brandishing number was based not on the polling data but "upon survey evidence that I have put together involving a large nationwide telephone survey conducted over a three month period during 1997."

In the second edition of his book, published in 2000, Lott attributed the brandishing claim to this three-month study. That year, in a piece for *The Criminologist*, Duncan had laid out his concerns. Lott, who was now in a temporary research position at Yale, responded in the same journal, providing some new specifics and an explanation for the confusion. "The survey that I oversaw interviewed 2,424 people from across the United States," he said. "I had planned on including a discussion of it in my book, but did not do so because an unfortunate computer crash lost my hard disk right before the final draft of the book had to be turned in."

In September, 2002, James Lindgren, a law professor at Northwestern University who has a Ph.D. in quantitative sociology, offered to examine the matter. Lott told Lindgren that the calls for the survey were made by University of Chicago

undergraduates, who volunteered for the work and used their own phones. Lott did not have phone records, but the students could confirm whether the survey was conducted in the first place. When Lindgren asked for the students' names, however, Lott said that he did not remember. Later, he explained that he was "horrible at names." Lindgren told me, "After all these years, no one has come forward to say they worked on the survey." Two people, however, claim that they were respondents; one of these, David Gross, is a former N.R.A. board member.

Lindgren also harbored grave doubts about the math. Lott's figures, Lindgren noted in a report, implied that twenty-five or twenty-six survey respondents had reported defensive gun uses. Lott had said that of the two per cent of respondents who had fired their weapons, three-quarters dispatched warning shots, while only a quarter attempted to hit another person. "If these figures were accurate," Lindgren explained, "only 1/2 of a person (2% of 25 people) reported firing a gun—and that 1/2 of a person breaks down further into 3/8 of a person firing warning shots and 1/8 of a person firing at someone." Lott said that he had "always acknowledged" that the samples were small.

In September, 2001, Lott became a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C, where he worked on a new book, titled "The Bias Against Guns: Why Almost Everything You've Heard About Gun Control Is Wrong." When it came out, in 2003, it included details of a follow-up survey on defensive gun use, with results that more or less aligned with his earlier conclusions. This time around, the numbers indicated that "brandishing a gun stops crimes 95 percent of the time."

To prove that the survey was real, Lott made his data publicly available. But the figures showed that there were only a thousand and fifteen respondents, and reported thirteen incidents of self-defense gun use, only one of which involved firing a weapon. David Hemenway, the Harvard economist, wrote at the time that the survey was "not nearly large enough to provide precise estimates of the percentage of self-defense gun users who merely brandish a firearm." For another

thing, the thirteen defensive episodes were confined to just seven people; four of these said that they used their firearm twice, and a fifth person claimed to have used it three times. In his own surveys on defensive gun use, Hemenway had asked participants to tell the story of what transpired when they used a firearm for self-protection. The respondents often described using their guns in an aggressive manner. “It turned out they were actually using their guns illegally,” Hemenway told me.

Lott’s emphasis on brandishing has not diminished. In a recent interview, he said, “People have the perception” that guns are not used in self-defense. Lott suggested that the media ignore such stories. “So you’re missing almost all the cases that are out there.”

On February 1, 2003, the day “The Bias Against Guns” was published, the *Washington Post* ran a story headlined “Scholar Invents Fan to Answer His Critics.” A staffer at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, had become suspicious of Mary Rosh, a woman who regularly showed up on Web sites to defend Lott from his critics. In one post, she described herself as one of his former Ph.D. students at Wharton, and said he was “the best professor that I ever had.” She added, “There were a group of us students who would try to take any class that he taught.” Rosh even explained why it made sense for her to carry a gun. “If a woman is being attacked by a 200 pound man, is she just supposed to wait until the police arrive?” she asked. “I am 114 lbs. and 5’6”. What should I do in that situation?”

The Cato staffer tracked Rosh’s I.P. address to Lott, who admitted that he was behind it. “I probably shouldn’t have done it—I know I shouldn’t have done it—but it’s hard to think of any big advantage I got except to be able to comment fictitiously,” he told the *Post*.

In the California deposition, Lott said the purpose of the pseudonym was to “keep people from being obnoxious and threatening.” Lott also contended that he was not the sole author of Rosh’s comments. One relative had “begged” him to “protect them from the firestorm that was occurring at the time.”

The episode damaged Lott’s reputation, which was further harmed in 2005, when the National Research Council, an arm of the National Academy of Sciences, released a book-length report called “Firearms and Violence.” One chapter assessed Lott’s finding that relaxing concealed-carry laws had caused a decrease in crime. The N.R.C. had tried to replicate Lott’s model, concluding that “it is not possible to determine that there is a causal link” between the two events.

By that point, Lott’s research had been influencing legislation for nearly a decade; a majority of states now had “shall-issue” laws, a number that would grow to nearly forty by the following year.

**F**or half a decade, Lott was confined to the margins. He briefly held a teaching position at Binghamton University, and then spent two years as a researcher at the University of Maryland, his last stint at an academic institution. He wrote for the *Washington Times* and Fox News’ Web site.

In 2012, a national tragedy presented a new opportunity. George Zimmerman, a self-appointed watchman in a Florida neighborhood, stalked and then fatally shot an unarmed Black teen-ager named Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman was not arrested for weeks, a delay that drew attention to the state’s Stand Your Ground law, which allows citizens who fear for their lives to use deadly force anywhere they have a right to be. (In 2013, Zimmerman was acquitted of charges of second-degree murder.)

The following year, the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee convened a hearing on Stand Your Ground laws. The model statute, created by an N.R.A. lobbyist, was

less than a decade old, and until Martin's death few Americans were familiar with it. Lott was called to serve as an expert witness. "These laws help allow individuals to defend themselves," Lott told the lawmakers. "This is particularly important in high-crime areas." He went on, "In the third edition of my book 'More Guns, Less Crime,' I provided the first published peer-reviewed study examining Stand Your Ground laws using national data. I found that they lowered murder rates by about nine per cent and that overall violent crime rates also declined."

Lott's prepared testimony was not subjected to deep scrutiny. It contained footnotes, and the one concerning Lott's study simply cited the third edition of "More Guns, Less Crime," without any page numbers. But the book does not mention Stand Your Ground.

When I questioned Lott about the discrepancy, he referred me to a section of his book that deals with Castle Doctrine laws, which, he said, "are a type of Stand Your Ground law." Lott told me that the section accounts "for the full spectrum of Stand Your Ground Laws," even though "those words are not used in the book." But the Castle Doctrine is different from Stand Your Ground. Lott correctly defined the former in his book. "This is the first study to look at the Castle Doctrine," the text reads, "which eliminates the requirement that people in their own home have to retreat as far as possible before defending themselves." Stand Your Ground, on the other hand, removed the duty to retreat in public.

The Castle study's sample period ends in 2005, the year Florida enacted the N.R.A.'s model Stand Your Ground statute. The law largely spread to states across the country from there. Those include Ohio, where in 2021 Mike DeWine, the state's Republican governor, initially indicated that he would veto the bill, urging the legislature to instead take up a package of gun-safety reforms. He then abruptly reversed course, with his press secretary stating that the decision relied on one of Lott's op-eds, which argued that such laws reduced murders. This year, a peer-reviewed study published in *JAMA Network Open* found that Stand Your

Ground was associated with up to an eleven-per-cent increase in monthly gun-homicide rates.

Almost a year after Trayvon Martin was killed, the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, in Newtown, Connecticut, galvanized gun-control advocates. For the first time since the early nineties, tighter federal-gun regulations, including universal background checks, were in play.

The Sandy Hook-inspired proposals failed to get through Congress, but they served as an effective fund-raising tool. Lott launched his nonprofit, the Crime Prevention Research Center, which received its tax-exempt status in August, 2013. The C.P.R.C. has studied gun-free zones and rates of mass shootings across the world, and it publishes an annual report—extensively covered by conservative media—on the number of concealed-handgun-permit holders in America. According to Lott's research, the number now exceeds twenty-one million. The C.P.R.C. never takes in more than a few hundred thousand dollars a year, and Lott has always drawn a salary of less than a hundred thousand dollars. He frequently emphasizes that his research is untainted by the gun industry or by special-interest money, and points to the C.P.R.C.'s policy of refusing donations from all manufacturers or groups that have a stake in the gun-control debate.

But, during Lott's deposition, when asked if the C.P.R.C. receives contributions from individuals who may be affiliated with the gun industry, he admitted, "I'm sure we probably get some donations from people that are in those things. But I don't go and screen them." He went on, "I draw the line in terms of banning an individual with their own money."

Lott said that the C.P.R.C.'s integrity was further guaranteed by the group's academic advisory board. "I think we're a relatively unique organization in terms of having people with strong views—or views on different sides of the issue about what's right or not. The reason why we do that is, like with any good academic-

type organization, you need to have critical people who disagree with you to give you comments before you put out research.” He added, “You want to make sure it’s right.”

Lott named several of the C.P.R.C.’s advisers who hold either neutral or supportive views on gun control. One was Scott Masten, a business-economics professor at the University of Michigan, and another was Karpoff, his U.C.L.A. classmate. When I asked Masten about his role at the C.P.R.C., he said, “The sum total of everything I did with respect to the center was agree to be an adviser.” When I asked Karpoff what he did, he said, “Literally nothing.”

**O**n April 10, 2015, Lott held the C.P.R.C.’s fund-raiser at a Hilton Hotel in Nashville, during the N.R.A.’s annual meeting there. In addition to Dana Loesch, who was on her way to becoming one of the N.R.A.’s most recognizable names, several other right-wing celebrities spoke, including the musician and gun activist Ted Nugent, who was both an N.R.A. and C.P.R.C. board member until 2018. Dressed in a camouflage shirt and a cowboy hat, he advocated for the extrajudicial killing of criminals and told the crowd that the C.P.R.C.’s work was just as important as the N.R.A.’s. “John works his ass off,” Nugent said, “and he needs to be paid more.” For the movement to succeed, he declared, Lott’s “almost Mr. Rogers-like delivery” was a necessity. He explained, “the juxtaposition between Ted Nugent the Second Amendment guy and John Lott the Second Amendment guy is dynamic. And we need both.”

As if to underscore the point, Lott delivered a fifteen-minute slide presentation with charts and graphs. Without the C.P.R.C., he said, the public would be exposed only to a “tidal wave” of research that was dishonest, overwhelmingly biased against firearms, and funded by President Barack Obama’s Administration and such insidious billionaire philanthropists as George Soros. Less than two weeks later, Lott pressed the same case on the conspiracy show Infowars, during a period when its founder and host, Alex Jones, was telling his listeners that the

mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School was staged by the government in order to justify new gun regulations. “He didn’t raise the claim while I was on [the] show,” Lott told me, by e-mail. “If he had, I would have corrected him.”

Around this time, Donald Trump was launching his Presidential campaign. He spoke at the N.R.A.’s convention, and, as the election drew closer, Lott began to campaign for Trump in numerous op-eds and radio interviews.

A month after Trump took office, Lott began corresponding with a top official at the Department of Justice named Ryan Newman, who now serves as general counsel to Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. In an e-mail in February, 2017, Lott wrote, “There were a number of ideas that I hope can be dealt with by the D.O.J.” He brought up the D.O.J.’s National Crime Victimization Survey, which, he said, “gun control advocates use” to “claim that guns are rarely used for self defense.” He asserted that “it needs to be fixed by changing a couple survey questions,” such as the poll’s screener about being a crime victim, which, by reducing subjectivity, weeds out potentially millions of unreliable responses.

Eventually, Lott compiled his recommendations into a document titled “A Partial List of John R. Lott, Jr.’s Ideas on Empirical Work That Could Be Done by the Department of Justice.” He circulated the list on multiple occasions to Newman, and, under a slightly altered title, to another D.O.J. official named Gary Barnett. In an e-mail to Barnett, he wrote, “As we discussed, we need new research to advance the Trump agenda and pull indefensible studies done during the Obama administration.”

After Trump took office, one policy that was on the table in Congress was “reciprocity,” which would require states to recognize one another’s concealed-handgun-permit holders, allowing individuals to carry their weapons anywhere in the country. Lott wrote, “Everyone knows the types of claims that will be made during congressional debates about how dangerous permit holders are, so before the various reciprocity bills come up, it is extremely important that [the D.O.J.]

do a study on this issue.” He clarified, “It is one thing for myself to do studies on how law-abiding concealed handgun permit holders are. It is something entirely different for the Department of Justice to do it.”

In cities around the country, police chiefs were critical of licensed gun carriers who were driving into metropolitan areas and leaving firearms in their parked cars. Thieves, the police said, were breaking into the vehicles, stealing the guns, and distributing them through the illegal market. Lott wanted this narrative put to rest. “There is one item that I could use your help quickly on [getting] some data before the reciprocity debate that is coming up in September,” he wrote to Newman. “The claim coming out from gun control advocates is that concealed handgun[s] are being stolen from permit holders and then being used in crime.” Lott then appears to ask Newman to do something illegal. “As I suspect you already know, there is a database for this information,” he said, “but unfortunately only law enforcement are allowed access to it.” Lott was referring to the National Criminal Information Center, which is strictly off limits to the public; a violation of the policy can be prosecuted as a federal crime. A week later, he followed up with Newman: “Just so you know, I believe that I was able to get a hold of the data that I had asked about.”

When I asked Lott about these e-mails, he wrote, “I have no memory of anyone ever mentioning anything to me about the data not being accessible to the public.” He went on, “In any case, while I was waiting to hear back from Newman, I talked to a Congressman about my interest in getting that data, and he offered to get the data for me. So that is how I got it.”

This summer, John Donohue, an empirical researcher and Stanford law professor who also testified in the California case, published a study in the National Bureau of Economic Research examining “shall-issue” laws in forty-seven U.S. cities over a forty-year period, from 1979 to 2019. The statutes, the study found, were linked to a twenty-nine-per-cent increase in violent gun crime. One of the driving factors: a thirty-five-per-cent jump in firearm theft.

In late 2019, John Dillon, the plaintiffs' attorney in the California assault-weapons case, asked Lott to join his team as an expert witness. During Lott's deposition, he said, "I have a rule that I won't take a case if I'm going to be paid by anybody who is involved in the gun industry or the N.R.A. or somebody else who has a dog in the fight."

It was a strange answer, given that multiple gun-rights organizations were listed as plaintiffs in the case. When asked if he was aware of their involvement, Lott said, "I have no doubt that that's true. I have no connection with them, and have had no contact with them about it." The attorney pressed him further. "Do you know which particular organizations are plaintiffs in this case?" he asked. "I haven't tried to look that up," Lott said. "It isn't relevant to me."

One of the plaintiffs was the Second Amendment Foundation, a group that focusses on litigation to expand gun rights. The month Lott joined the case, the organization held a conference in Phoenix. Dillon, the plaintiffs' attorney, was one of the speakers, and he discussed the case on a panel. Another speaker was Lott, who delivered a lecture at the event, and was named Scholar of the Year. He told me, "When the case was in process, I never talked to anyone at the Second Amendment Foundation about it. I didn't even know that they were involved."

I asked Lott if he was paid for his work on the California case. He replied, "I was not paid by the plaintiffs." During his deposition, he had disclosed that he was earning four hundred and fifty dollars an hour to serve as an expert. When I followed up, he wrote, "I was paid by a private individual who doesn't work in the firearms industry and does not run nor hold a position of any type in any self-defense oriented organization." He added, "I will not go into further detail out of respect for their privacy."

In June, 2020, under the direction of the Trump White House, the D.O.J. offered Lott a job, pending a background check. It was an exciting time for

him. Lott was moving to Missoula, Montana, after David Strom, a seventy-nine-year-old who had recently died, left him money and a two-bedroom house with a view of the mountains. Strom was a veteran, a police officer, a gun enthusiast, and a lifetime N.R.A. member; according to an obituary, he supported organizations that “defended the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.” Before his death, records show, Strom had made Lott a beneficiary of his trust, which held the home. It is unclear how Lott and Strom were connected. But Lott once told Karpoff, his former classmate, that he had received the house from a fan. Lott has never publicly acknowledged Strom, but, according to court documents, he sued the trustee for more cash. “There was ten thousand dollars in the trust,” Lott wrote me, “and as soon as the trustee disbursed the cash in accordance with the will, the lawsuit was dropped.”

It can take months to clear a government background check, and, by the time the D.O.J. was finished looking into Lott, the Trump Administration was near its end. Before taking his position as a senior adviser, ethics rules required him to relinquish his role at the C.P.R.C. On October 9, 2020, the organization put out a press release announcing Lott’s replacement, Robert F. Turner, a national-security specialist in his late seventies who was a law professor at the University of Virginia for more than thirty years.

Lott started at the D.O.J. on October 20, 2020. Two days later, one of the most prominent national-security think tanks in the country, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, released a report titled “The War Comes Home: The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States.” Its key finding was not surprising: “White supremacists and other like-minded extremists conducted two-thirds of the terrorist plots and attacks in the United States in 2020.” Turner said that “Dr. Lott was anxious to have me respond” to the study. “It was my understanding,” he told me, that the C.P.R.C. “wanted me to write something challenging or refuting” it. Turner did not know why, and declined to do so. “I did

not want my name associated with anything that might imply that I was other than outraged by such monstrous behavior,” he said.

In a matter of weeks, Turner, a cancer survivor who was struggling to write op-eds—one of his core responsibilities as president of the C.P.R.C.—left the organization. Lott does not dispute Turner’s recollection of the report, but said that Turner’s departure was not related to it, and instead pointed to his lack of productivity.

Lott’s three-month stint at the D.O.J. was unremarkable. He compiled data relating to the background-check system, and reviewed F.B.I. reports he found problematic. Lott left the day before Joe Biden was sworn into office.

In June, 2021, after the judge struck down California’s assault-weapon ban, Lott turned his attention to other matters. In the past few years, a flurry of states have passed laws abolishing their concealed-carry permit systems. Known among gun-rights advocates as Constitutional Carry, the new statutes allow anyone who can legally purchase a firearm to carry a concealed handgun in public, with no license required. It is the logical evolution of the “shall-issue” concept, and Lott has embraced it. In December, he co-wrote an op-ed for the Orlando *Sentinel* arguing in favor of the law with Anthony Sabatini, a Republican state representative in Florida who was sponsoring a Constitutional Carry bill there and had the first byline. A month later, Lott co-wrote an op-ed in the Omaha *World-Herald* with Tom Brewer, a Republican state senator in Nebraska who was sponsoring Constitutional Carry legislation in his state. The column’s language was virtually identical to that of Lott and Sabatini’s op-ed in the *Sentinel*. In February, the column was published again, in *Yellowhammer News*, an outlet in Alabama. Lott’s co-writer was Shane Stringer, a Republican representative who was sponsoring the Constitutional Carry bill there. Finally, Lott published the op-ed on his own in March, in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, replacing the names of the other states with Georgia, which was considering similar legislation. The bills in Florida

and Nebraska stalled, but passed in Alabama and Georgia. Half of all states now have a Constitutional Carry law in place.

Brewer's office said that it had asked Lott for help with the senator's bill, and that Lott had suggested he could either co-author or ghostwrite an op-ed. After the office agreed to a shared byline, Lott e-mailed text, which Brewer's staff accepted without making any changes. Lott, the office said, did not disclose that he was publishing the same language with legislators in other states. None of the other lawmakers who supposedly co-authored those op-eds responded to requests for comment. "What I told any of the newspapers or others such as Brewer's office was that I wouldn't submit a similar piece to any other newspapers in that state," Lott wrote to me. "State newspapers only require exclusivity within their state."

Recently, in an interview after the Uvalde shooting, Senator Ted Cruz cited Lott's research to argue that such incidents are rare in the United States relative to the rest of the world. Adam Lankford, a criminologist at the University of Alabama, had closely inspected Lott's data, and discovered that Lott had inflated the world's figures by including "attacks by terrorist organizations, genocidal militias, armed rebel groups, and paramilitary fighters." The data even contained a slaughter directed by the President of Nigeria, in which soldiers killed as many as two hundred civilians. These were not comparable acts of violence to Uvalde, Buffalo, or, say, the 2017 music-festival shooting in Las Vegas. Lott disagrees. "We do not exclude incidents of public mass shooting just because we think we know the motivation of the shooter or shooters," he and a co-author wrote in *Econ Journal Watch*.

Without Lott, there would be no counter-narrative for those who have come to need one. Gun rights represent a way of life, an identity tied to ideas about individualism that, for many Americans, fill a void. Republicans like Cruz recognize the potency of the issue, and use it to mobilize voters, reinforcing the notion that they are protecting society by arming themselves—a noble calling. During the pandemic, Americans have bought more firearms than ever before,

and, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, gun homicides have surpassed their previous all-time peak, reached in 1993. In Philadelphia, the number of permits issued rose from seventy-four hundred, in 2020, to fifty-two thousand, in 2021. Last year, there were five hundred and sixty-one murders in the city—the highest number ever recorded there. The violence has been normalized. In October, a fifteen-year-old boy shot to death four adults and a teen-ager in a middle-class neighborhood in Raleigh, North Carolina. The event hardly registered. ♦

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*Mike Spies is a senior writer at The Trace and a 2017 Livingston Awards finalist.*

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